

Occupied London » Resisting, Subverting and Destroying the Apparatus of Surveillance and Control: An Interview with Mike Davis

Mike Davis is professor of history at the University of California, Irvine, and the author of, amongst others, “City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles” (1990), “Dead Cities, And Other Tales” (2003) and most recently, “Buda’s Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb” (2007). Following is a short excerpt from the interview he kindly gave to Voices on the 23d of February in London.



You often draw lines of comparison between different tendencies of urban control across the globe. Could you compare the situation in Los Angeles, the repression and surveillance happening there when you were writing *City of Quartz* with the situation in London today?

There is nothing comparable at all in the U.S. to the apparatus of surveillance that exists in London. Even CCTV cameras are only recently becoming an issue in the U.S. Total surveillance of down town areas of American cities is something I wrote about in the early nineties but only applied to tiny areas, a few acres in down town Los Angeles for example. If Giuliani does become president we will get closer to the idea of having total surveillance and control in the city centre but London is at least one if not two generations ahead of the United States. Having said that, the foundations in the U.S. exist: the freeways now have surveillance systems that monitor gridlock. But I find London really shocking in many ways. I had no idea for instance until I came here about the fact that subway passes are used to monitor and accumulate data. In the United States things have gone in a different direction. Obviously, in every economic transaction you have and particularly on the internet, data is being transferred or sold for marketing purposes. I think the American political system might be the most advanced in the world in this sense – using marketing data to target people and pass political messages across to them. Also, there is a much larger budget and much bigger research effort going on in the U.S. To give you an example of how this works: The Bush Administration wants guest programmes to satisfy the labour needs of crucial industries like agribusiness. Alas it has been blindsided by a revolt in the republican grassroots against democrats. One of the things they are calling for is building a wall the

entire length of the Mexican border and the Congress has actually authorised part of that, although people who actually work on border control and surveillance laugh at it since these walls would be totally ineffective: 12-foot high sheets of metal that anyone could climb. They are working on something completely different: a virtual border, more like the virtual control that now exists around the city of London. They had to feed red meat to the conservatives in the suburbs who wanted a Berlin-like physical wall since only that gives them the reassurance of border control. Real control over people's movement however does not so much require these walls as it requires the technology. This is the one sphere where I think the U.S. is more advanced in creating a society of total surveillance. Perry, the Governor of Texas, has authorised putting cameras up on areas of the border that people commonly cross and plugged them in to the internet. So it has created virtual vigilantes. Anybody who wants can waste their time looking at a desert, and if you see a Mexican coming across it you can call a number to some department of the Texas state which will alert the border control.

So the internet gets to threaten freedom because of the way in which we can all surveil, oppress and jail each other: we are all prison guards now, watching each others' movements. This is a frightening idea and the right-wing loves it, having some role to play in the policing of immigration and society. Everyone wants to wear a badge in some sense.

In LA they recently put on digital screens on the freeways to give warnings about traffic, although we are still far behind Europe in that. They now use them for alerts on kidnaps etc. The problem with implementing a lot of this in the U.S. and in inner cities in particular is that it wouldn't survive for a day! They would have to in some way to arm, fortify and protect surveillance cameras. The degree of vandalism in American inner cities is so advanced and extensive... I once calculated the square footage of graffiti in LA and interviewed people cleaning up graffiti. One morning I got up and the inside of my mailbox had been tagged. When you have that many kids engaging with vandalism, graffiti etc. they will start putting up cameras but they are going to be broken and torn down. It might work well with the middle class – it will work well at leafy suburbs of Santon or white parts of Johannesburg but when you start putting the surveillance cameras in the townships or the American ghettos, you will have to have a policeman standing in front of them each. This is one of the contradictions of surveillance society. CCTV is not nearly as advanced in the US as in Europe. People are more reassured by private police in the U.S.

Why aren't cameras being vandalised in London?

That would be one of my questions too. I think that we need to propagandise and fight for the idea of a universal insurrection against surveillance state, against the erosion of civil liberties. We need to encourage people and find every way possible in which to resist, subvert and destroy the apparatus of surveillance and control. Of course, millions of teenagers do that anyway. Kevin Lynch wrote a book on vandalism; he was very interested in vandalism as an urban process, in spontaneous vandalism of all sorts. He studied it in the seventies, partially to understand how architects could combat it and partially because he was interested in its logic. He thought that anything that involved people and the built environment, including destroying it, was a good thing. If you wanted to generate a theory of participatory architecture or urbanism, vandalism seemed to be the most common and popular form of participating in the built environment by revolting against its dehumanisation, in working class council estates in American inner cities and so on.

I think we need a strategy to support each other; we should vandalise and subvert the surveillance state and the middle class that supports it. Tearing down the armed response signs from peoples' lawns freaks them out... Not that the armed response is real or reliable, but people get immense reassurance from having the sign there. If you remove it they think that all forces might mobilise against them and that they might get killed the next day. I started off vandalising lawn jockeys – these are a phenomenon of American segregation and racism. They are black jockey figures put in the lawn like the pink flamingos they put there. They are popular amongst people who are nostalgic of the old racial order, when all blacks were servants or slaves. When I went back to L.A. in the late eighties I discovered that there were quite a few of these around houses in Beverly Hills. It is something to which all the creative energy of youth needs to be applied: to find ways in which to fight back and subvert the surveillance society.

To your central question I have no answer to at all. I lived in London in the eighties, very unhappy and poor, but had some great inspiring moments. I was down in Fleet Street at the battle of Fortress Murdoch, with the print workers battling the cops every night... Wonderful things. A lot of tremendous energy in the city. So I am appalled to come back here and see peoples' complaisance and complacency.

London is a place where so many people come through.... Migrants coming to work, students coming to study, a constant flux of people coming in and out. We were wondering if that has something to do with this complacency – or does it, on the other hand, provide in itself possibilities for resistance?

It does, though today immigrants are as radically vulnerable in London as they are in the U.S. I gave a talk the other night and tried to explain that it is hard to think of a time in the American history that immigrants (including legal ones) have been so vulnerable. The Bush Administration's position is that even legal immigrants have no real standing under the American Bill of Rights or Constitution. You do not have the protection of habeas corpus, Anglo-saxon liberty etc. Gigantic immigrant rights protests took place last year in the United States expressing people's existential anxiety, the recognition that they have got a right to stand. On the other hand, the logic of this in London is clear: More than New York, London is the ultimate playground of rich people. Russian billionaires come here, not to NYC. Everything is being done to reassure that this is the ultimate secure place to park your money. London has always played this role to some degree though it used to be considered that NYC was the ultimate place to go. London has been challenging this very aggressively, the irony being that this aggression is partially driven by Ken Livingstone's policies.

In your RIBA lecture you spoke of cities as the only viable solution for the future, when talking about the environment. Could you elaborate?

Inevitably, this will become a world in which at least two thirds of the population will live in cities. I wish I could believe in traditional Kropotkinite ideas of returning to mutual aid in the countryside... that's why I think we have to dust off this great conversation about alternative cities between socialists and anarchists roughly around the 1880s and the 1930s. Cities are the only way to square the circle between humanity's demand for equality and a decent standard of living in a sustainable planet. The substitute for ever going intensified private or individual consumption is the public luxury of the city. I am very much influenced by the constructivist ideas deriving from Russia in the early twenties. They were confronted with the fact that Russia had no capacity to build very lavish housing for the working class, but they would compensate by creating the most wonderful, utopian public spaces. Every factory would have a great sports centre, a cinema or a library. Public space not only satisfies the same needs, it also produces and satisfies other ones. It is one thing to be alone at home with an infinity of pornography on the internet and quite a different thing to be young, in the plaza or the public space surrounded by people your own age and all the possibilities that brings along....

In essence, the city is the economy of scale: it produces the most sufficient relationship between humans and nature. It produces a public or social wealth comprising not only a substitute for private consumption or private wealth, but is also the basis for needs that cannot exist or be fulfilled under capitalism. If people had a choice between all the pornography you can ingest in your lifetime and flirting with people in an enormous bathhouse, what would you choose? That is the genius of the city. Patrick Geddes, the great urban thinker from Edinburgh and friend of Kropotkin's, was the first one to see that the dependency of the city and its vulnerable condition on its hinterland is watershed that urban density supported the preservation of open space and services the nature. He was the first one to think deeply about the politics of infrastructure and recycling, not exporting waste downstream, sustainability... To see that in some relationship to social justice. He is the one who went to India with the British Army asking about sanitation systems in the country. The Indians had solved their problems – they know what to do with their shit. You are the ones who've got the problem, as you want to dump it in the water! There is a direct connection between Geddes and Kropotkin and a whole, partially lost anarchist tradition thinking about self-organised urban space, self-governed cities and how cities work environmentally. There is no other possible solution: Trading carbon credits in markets will not save the earth. Building cities that are truly cities in the most profound sense will do so. Creating an equality of pleasure and public luxury will do so. And recognising that consumption has turned into a rampant disease that poisons us and our children.

In 1934 came an end to the discussion and free thinking about alternative urbanism ranging across the span from abandoning the cities and going back to mutual aid and the countryside to, at some cases, in the Soviet Union, visions of super-cities, hyper-cities. There is a hugely rich vein of creative utopian thought about urbanism that needs to recur. It is not just the product of thinkers and planners, projects and case studies by governments, but it is also about capturing the individual activity of urban dwellers and poor people, everyone.

Talking about the provos in Amsterdam, the situationists etc... The problem is often creating use of urban space by avant-garde groups, people trying to reclaim and maintain traditional bohémias: refugees, squatters, artists... Inadvertently doing the work of redevelopers and real estate. In Los Angeles, despite tons of money thrown at the downtown (Los Angeles has one of the most inhuman downtowns in the world), the city never managed to gentrify it. The turning point was when my architecture students and starving artists willing to live side-by-side with homeless people started moving in the studio spaces there. They finally got to the point where they created cool places: restaurants and bars started to open, just like with the Lower East Side in NYC or Soho in London. Prices skyrocketed, these people were pushed out and the yuppies came in, and they were in turn replaced by even richer people. This is a real problem because when you get some creative network or community of young people trying to live in the city in a

different manner they can unwillingly become foot soldiers.

Reformist politics has zero to say about this. There is absolutely no reformist government anywhere in the world that can deal with the serious and major issues of urban inequality, because it will not take on property values, land inflation etc. Until you start talking about confiscating the incriminating land value or socialising land or systems of limited equity in land, you cannot control the city, you cannot achieve any real equality in it.